

Results of Peacham Community Forum Discussions, August 20, 2010
Prepared by Barry Lawson with assistance from David Edwards

The Peacham Collaborator Group hosted a community forum at the Peacham Congregational Church in August 2010 with the assistance of Small Growth Vermont, a local resident, and the UVM Extension Service. The purpose of the Forum was to provide opportunity for residents to discuss and comment on issues surrounding future development in Peacham. Four major issues were selected: affordable housing, town services and space needs, recreation, and consumer needs. More than eighty people attended the forum, and most of them participated in the discussion sessions.

Bill McMaster of the UVM Extension Service directed the forum, and he was assisted by a team of neutral facilitators, each of whom guided a discussion in one of the major issues areas. Notes were taken on flip charts and subsequently transcribed. This report is based on the transcribed notes and summarizes conclusions that can be drawn from the discussions on each issue.

The Collaborator Group has unofficially adopted a goal of promoting and maintaining community vitality. The Group, which has been discussing issues surrounding development and other issues in the community for over four years, will attempt to integrate the community's ideas and comments into its continuing deliberations. One general conclusion is that, with a few exceptions, townspeople opt for minimizing public expenditures and often take a 'let's make do' approach when confronted by identified town needs. Some take a skeptical attitude toward interfering with the natural flow of community life, preferring to take action only when a clear path forward seems obvious and unavoidable. Several individuals volunteered their help in promoting and pursuing new ideas, including many for relatively inexpensive community projects.

Affordable Housing

Peacham confronted significant changes in the affordable housing picture in 2010. Prominent among them was the closing of the Science Building that has provided 4 of the 10 affordable units for seniors that existed in the village for many years. The Science Building may be rehabilitated for other uses, including housing possibly. Upgrades have been made to the six apartments in Kinerson Hall, primarily to increase energy efficiency. Discussions have been held with Habitat for Humanity – NEK regarding the possible construction of one or more affordable units for young families in town. Recent changes to the town's zoning ordinance (following state mandates) have encouraged more 'mother-in-law' apartments in existing homes to increase the supply of affordable dwelling units.

In the midst of these changes and challenges has come another overriding challenge: Housing Vermont, the lead partner with Peacham Community Housing (PCH) for the past 15 years, has announced that it wishes to withdraw its involvement with affordable housing in Peacham by the end of 2011. This thrusts PCH into a more substantial role, either in finding another suitable, experienced partner or in assuming the major managerial role itself. This latter option comes with a steep learning curve for PCH, and

the need for moral support from the community is crucial. Housing Vermont is helping PCH through this transition, but for a volunteer board this is a venture for which they have not been well prepared.

It is with this background that the participants in the Forum's housing session offered insights and suggestions. Comments can be summarized as follows:

- It is important to maintain historical (architectural) integrity in affordable housing – preservation and continuity should be important objectives and, when planning for the possible addition of units to the six remaining affordable units, strong consideration should be given to purchasing existing building(s) for multiple housing purposes;
- Habitat for Humanity can provide a viable option for young families – this would provide 'sweat equity' opportunities for potential owners and take advantage of volunteer opportunities for labor and materials;
- To preserve open space, new housing should be provided in areas where the density of housing is already relatively high, i.e., the villages;
- Conversion of large houses to multi-family rentals and ownership makes good sense, especially if the net result is a viable mixed economy and multi-generational village atmospheres;
- Planning and zoning need to be synchronized with the affordable housing goals of the community; and sound principles should be developed to guide the design of new housing and housing areas (e.g., safe walkways in winter, a sustainable wastewater system);
- Ridesharing and dependable transit systems are needed for those unable to drive – this is particularly true as Peacham currently has very little in the way of convenience stores, and many services on which older people depend are located at least seven miles, and often 17 miles away.

Town Services and Space Needs

The Collaborator Group has devoted much time studying the space needs for town services, especially those that involve the Town Hall and gymnasium. Several factors have driven these efforts. First, is the spatial configuration of the Town Hall that presently provides inadequate space for the Town Clerk, Listers and for meetings of town groups from the Selectboard to the Planning Commission and Zoning Board of Adjustment. Second, is the energy inefficiency of the building itself – although steps are now being taken to find at least a partial remedy for this problem. Third, is the loss of the upstairs gymnasium for town meeting at least until an egress problem is solved to the satisfaction of the state fire marshal. The town has found at least a temporary solution by using the village church for the annual meeting.

There are several sub-issues on this topic of space needs of other town organizations, the future of the public elementary school, and the costs for building new, or rehabilitating existing, facilities. The Collaborator Group has found it challenging to try, even

theoretically, to match spatial demands with the supply available or likely to be available in the future. It is likely that one problem will be addressed at a time, yet the Group believes that exploiting opportunities for multiple uses of space and coordination among groups is a wise financial course. The following summarizes most of the points raised during this session:

- Town Hall – Some sentiment exists for maintaining the historical integrity of this building which has housed many diverse uses over the years; also, there is considerable support for maintaining the gymnasium, perhaps not only for use as a gymnasium (despite day-time noise and size issues) but also as a venue for holiday bazaars, voting, Fall Foliage, and the occasional public hearing. There is a continuing option to invest money to upgrade the gymnasium for town meeting or other uses, but action on this front has gained no momentum over the past few years.
- Town Office Space –Redesign of existing Town Hall space, using the library basement as a supplemental meeting area, or building new space are all under discussion. Use of space at the school would be possible if the building is no longer needed for classrooms in the future. An option is adding space to the Town Hall on either end of the building and concepts for both e being studied.
- Post Office – Despite a five-year postal service contract for space in the Town Hall, one has to consider the possibility that Peacham may eventually lose this facility as the USPS struggles with the costs of rural service. This raises the question of how Peacham could induce the Post Office to stay (improved and less expensive facility); or failing that, how that current space could be used in the future without postal facilities.
- Elementary School – A wild card is the future of the elementary school, increasingly in question given declining enrollments and costs in comparison to consolidation. Some people noted the natural affinity between the school and the new nearby astronomy facility, and there is solid support from many for holding onto the school as long as possible.
- New Space – An attractive option to some for many reasons, from attaining greater energy efficiency to providing the appropriate quality, security and room, but new space comes at a cost. Can that cost be offset in long-term savings or revenue from sale of existing space? This is a question to be addressed, as well as what the existing space will be used for ten or fifteen or fifty years down the road.
- Tennis Court – Long in disrepair and therefore seldom utilized, the court takes up space that might be better used. It could also be redesigned to be of regulation size and quality. The court could be relocated to adjoin other athletic facilities near the town field, freeing the existing court space for other uses such as an annex to the Town Hall, parking, etc.
- Old Town Offices/Bus Barn – The Collaborator Group and Peacham Community Housing envision eventual rehabilitation of this building to more productive use. The Historical Society wishes to move out and into a new facility (see below) and the bus barn could be converted into a café/store, especially if the General Store remains closed much of the time. While some wonder if there is a market for a café or small store with convenience goods in the village, there are others who

point to the South Peacham Store's success before it was closed (not due to lack of demand!), increasing transportation costs especially for seniors, and the growth in popularity of the farmers market and coffee hour at the library.

- Library – thanks to an investment to improve and increase library space several years ago, this building has been a boon to Peacham. It is estimated that over 30 organizations use the basement space; and the Town itself may consider using this non-government space for some town uses (as with the church). It is the center for Wifi service in Town for those underserved by cable or broadband, and future demand for library facilities will increase over the years.
- Peacham Historical Association – In need of new consolidated space that is appropriate for the storage, display and administration of its growing number of artifacts, PHA has defined a default solution - a new building adjacent to the Historical House. Failing any more cost-effective solution, PHA will focus on at least the design of such a new facility. Perhaps there may be some flexibility for space- and cost- sharing as plans move forward.
- Vaults – vault management is an issue of some importance. The town requires vault space, but this may not increase dramatically in the future as electronic records will be gradually phased in. The Historical Association also requires vault space. The current vault in the Old Town Office may have to be discarded and replaced and the vault in the Town Clerk's Office may have to be moved, or at least re-oriented for more efficient use.

Recreation

Peacham has made slow progress in enhancing its recreation facilities. Again, money has been a dominant factor, extending from the time when the elementary school was built and enlarged without an accompanying gymnasium. The current gymnasium serves many purposes, including as a venue for school and recreational basketball; however, the noise from the bouncing balls reverberates to the offices below and is an irritant to daytime uses and some evening uses as well. The athletic fields and playground near the school have been adequate to serve needs of the town up to a point. But, as mentioned above, the tennis court next to the Town Hall is in poor condition and not used. A regulation baseball field is being considered as an overlay to the soccer field, and the Little League field near the school is in decent shape. There are few level walking areas in town, and there is a proposal for creating a walking area around the athletic field. Safe walking areas and nature trails have been under development in the village and beyond, and the town is fortunate to have excellent unofficial cross-country and official snowmobile trails.

Several suggestions were aired at the Forum to enhance recreational opportunities in Town. Many of these do not require new facilities, little, if any, cost and could be started by as few as two or three people. Some imagination is required and determination to get things started, but some practical and innovative ideas were discussed.

- The town needs more safe paths, preferably many of them level, that are clearly marked and accessible to the population, including seniors;

- School children should have safe walking paths to school and to the gymnasium;
- It is wise to have some winter trails designated for snowmobile use and some designated for cross-country skiing;
- The Luther Parker Fletcher Field should have an overall multi-use plan to encourage more intensive use of this land;
- The Astronomy facility provides not only educational but entertainment value to the community – this value should be maximized;
- The blacksmith shop could be more intensively used;
- Broadband should be extended throughout the Town and used as a medium for communicating information about events and the conditions of facilities, trails;
- Workshops on more passive but entertaining activities could include sessions on cooking, gardening, sign language, art, music and other pursuits;
- Lack of swimming facilities continues to be a regret for many. Peacham does not have a legally defined public swimming space. Some use Barnet Beach, some swim illegally at Martin's Pond, but the issue has not been addressed for years;
- Games like cribbage, bridge, board games could be promoted especially from a multi-generational standpoint.

Consumer Needs and Services

The fourth major issue regards the provision of consumer needs and services in Town. With the closing of the Bayley-Hazen Store several years ago and the uncertain openings of the village General Store, Peacham residents have had to depend on out-of-town shopping. For some this has meant the store and gas station in West Barnet, Marty's or Diamond Hill in Danville, or supermarkets or natural food shops in St. Johnsbury or beyond. For many, having a store in town is a major criterion for a viable community. Others accept Peacham increasingly and inevitably becoming solely a bedroom community.

There are countervailing factors, however. A two-year-old farmers market has gained some attention. Cooperative purchasing as well as a CSA have encouraged local buying. Local farms and vendors find outlets at the Peacham, Danville, Groton and St. Johnsbury farmers markets. Some thoughts expressed at the forum addressed how local needs will be supplied in the future.

- Peacham could benefit by having a community vision addressing consumer needs – identifying those needs, whom is most affected, how are these needs currently satisfied (or not), and what can be done, even if on a limited-hours basis to meet these needs in town and provide opportunities for employment or successful farming in Peacham;
- Peacham should look at alternative models beyond the for-profit businesses – e.g., other communities are trying and succeeding with cooperatives, perhaps one of these models will work for Peacham;
- Another alternative is to provide better access to out-of-town services through car pools and public transportation if gasoline prices rise (and as Route 2 in

Danville undergoes a 2-year reconstruction project). Both time and money may factor more in people's decisions for shopping. But people need to travel for pharmacies, medical and hospital care, banking, gasoline, haircuts and beauty shops, etc.;

- The new summer farmers market may lead to a winter market for vegetables and meats, community-supported enterprises, and local mobile vendors;
- Tourism is currently concentrated on the July 4 celebration, Fall Foliage, the farmers market, and vacation homes. Perhaps, as some indicate, there are opportunities to bring more money into town to support local farmers, artisans and businesses and increase community vitality.

Conclusions

The overall success of the Community Forum was that it encouraged wider discussion about Peacham's future. The Collaborator Group, always as open to new participants, still represents only a minority of interests in town, albeit from most of the major organizations. Opportunities for town-wide involvement will continue to be important.